

Cancer check speeds death, family claims

by George Rosie



Hill: double jeopardy

A METHOD used by doctors to diagnose mesothelioma, a rare form of cancer induced by asbestos, may in fact have served to hasten the patient's death. This is one of the complaints raised by an angry Glasgow family, now demanding an official inquiry into the death last June of their 68-year-old father, Ronald Hill.

The method in question, pleural biopsy, involves the extraction of a sample of tissue from the chest lining. But a Department of Health and Social Security pamphlet, published in 1979, warns doctors against pleural biopsies for diagnostic purposes because "they are frequently followed by the spread of tumour to the chest wall".

Against this, a senior chest consultant at Ruchill Hospital, Glasgow, who performed a series of pleural biopsies on Mr Hill, claims that doctors are in a Catch 22 predicament.

The consultant, Geoffrey Allan, points out: "On the one hand, the Health Department is telling us not to use the method for diagnosis. On the other, the Department's medical panels (which determine the size of the pension sufferers should receive) are demanding pretty conclusive histological evidence."

Allan says that no consequent spread of the disease occurred in Ronald Hill's case and insists that there was "just no other way" of getting a proper diagnosis. "We needed to know whether the patient was suffer-

ing from mesothelioma, which is not susceptible to treatment, or from some other small cell cancer, which might have been."

Ted Rushworth, of the Glasgow-based Cancer Prevention Society, which has helped many mesothelioma victims to make claims, believes the levels of proof demanded by the DHSS can be too high.

Among other protests voiced by the Hill family is that, when their father died on June 3, nine months after being told he had mesothelioma, the DHSS had still not made an offer in response to his claim for a disablement pension. Its offer eventually came through at the end of July.

Such official delays seem particularly prevalent in Glasgow, which has the highest incidence of mesothelioma in Britain - due to the liberal use of asbestos in the Clyde shipyards.

Other mesothelioma black-spots are the shipbuilding areas of Tyneside, London and Belfast, and such naval dockyard towns as Portsmouth - and the situation seems unlikely to improve in the near future. According to a research paper by two Glasgow doctors, Alistair Dorwald and Bryan Stack, the latent period for the disease averages 40 years or more.

Ronald Hill's family think it likely that the asbestos which eventually killed him was inhaled while working in the mid-Sixties on the installation of asbestos ceilings in Glasgow's 32-storey Red Road flats. (Although the district council recently spent more than £2 million converting two of the tower blocks into accommodation for students, nurses and the YMCA. The Sunday Times has learned that the original asbestos ceilings are still in place.)

However, it seems that Hill had been in double jeopardy, because in the Fifties he worked as a joiner in John Brown's shipyard on the Clyde.

In pressing Glasgow's procurator fiscal to hold a fatal accident inquiry into Hill's death, his family also want to know why the hospital failed to inform the procurator fiscal that he had died from mesothelioma, in accordance with the automatic procedure.

But the Registrar General for Scotland says that automatic referral did not come into force until June 10 this year - one week after Ronald Hill died.